

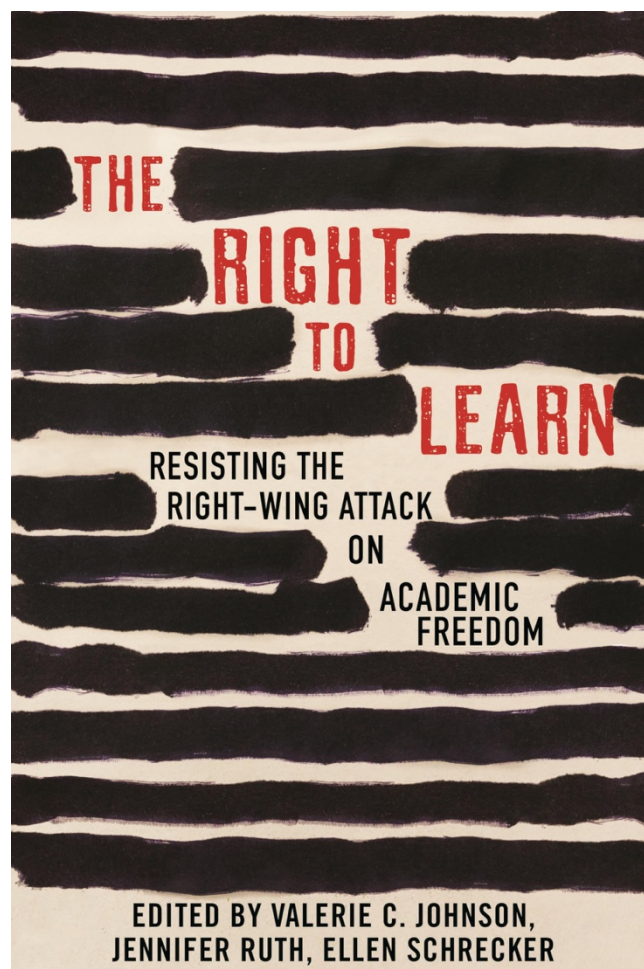
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

The Right to Learn: Resisting the Right Wing Attack on Academic Freedom

by Robert Cohen



THE RIGHT TO LEARN: RESISTING THE RIGHT WING ATTACK ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM, EDITED BY VALERIE C. JOHNSON, JENNIFER RUTH, AND ELLEN SCHRECKER (2024). BEACON PRESS.

The Right to Learn: Resisting the Right Wing Attack on Academic Freedom, Edited by Valerie C. Johnson, Jennifer Ruth, and Ellen Schrecker (2024). Beacon Press.

Keeping up with the American right wing's authoritarian tendencies is a daunting task. Day by day, the right opens new fronts in its war on democracy, free speech, and academic freedom, fueled by lies and lavishly funded misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Journalists seem best suited to keep track of this parade of atrocities, since those working for newspapers can supplement the record on a daily basis, much like the Washington Post's fact checkers— who by the end of the Trump presidency had tabulated 30,573 false and misleading statements by the twice-impeached president.

The dizzying pace of right-wing lies and authoritarian initiatives made it impossible for the editors of *The Right to Learn: Resisting the Right Wing Attack on Academic Freedom* to keep up, since this brilliant and important new anthology, edited by Valerie C. Johnson, Jennifer Ruth, and Ellen Schrecker, took more than a year to research and publish, and went to press before right wingers in Congress and the donor class ushered in the most recent wave of academic unfreedom and free-speech violations, which was the nationwide suppression of the campus movement against the war in Gaza. But though we will need another book to cover this year's firings of college presidents and faculty critics of the war, not to mention the censored graduation speakers and the mass arrests of non-violent student antiwar protesters, *The Right to Learn* is the book we have all been waiting for about the earlier—and ongoing round of rightwing repression aimed at stifling critical teaching on race, gender, and sexuality. The collection features 13 informative chapters by leading scholars and activists who have been both studying and resisting the attempts of right-wing politicians, billionaires, and think tanks to ban the teaching of Critical Race theory, LGBTQ+ history and anti-racist education, to silence progressive, dissenting voices in K-12 and higher education, and to replace them with a cheerleading American exceptionalist approach to the teaching and learning of politics and history.

The editors of *The Right to Learn* also bring to this work impressive credentials as defenders of academic freedom: Valerie C. Johnson helped lead the national campaign of the African American Policy Forum, mobilizing faculty senates on 80 campuses to pass resolutions against the recently enacted right-wing-initiated laws and policies barring the teaching of Critical Race Theory and other supposedly divisive topics on racial and gender justice. Jennifer Ruth and Ellen Schrecker have been central figures in the American Association of University Professors' initiatives to preserve academic freedom in the face of a relentless right-wing assault. These editors bring to this volume a sense of urgency that make it—despite its intellectual rigor—far more than a scholarly tome documenting the trampling of academic freedom in Trumpified America; it is a call to resist, to stand up for the right to teach our students honestly and critically about

race and racism, [the] African American experience, gender, sexual identity, and [the] LGBTQ+ experience in the US.

This activist ethos is reflected in the title of *The Right to Learn*'s introductory chapter, "A Time for Faculty to Act," and in the book's structure, which includes not only sections on "the current culture war" that impressively document the academic freedom crisis we face, but also a final section "Collective Action and Visible Resistance." This resistance section narrates stories by faculty, including two riveting accounts from Florida (whose far-right governor, Ron De Santis, has made it ground zero for the trampling of academic freedom), by Sharon Austin and Katie Rainwater, who stood up courageously and effectively for their freedom to teach and deploy their expertise on topics reactionaries seek to ban. Such stories offer powerful evidence that— if they choose to use it—faculty both collectively and individually can defy the would-be censors of the American and inspire others to do the same.

The Right to Learn offers convincing evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, of how extensive and extreme the right-wing legislative offensive has been to restrict the teaching of controversial topics. PEN America refers to these laws as "educational gag orders," and in the informative chapter by PEN organizer Jonathan Friedman and his colleagues Jeremy C. Young and James Tager, we learn that since 2021 state legislators introduced 306 bills in 45 states attempting to enact such gag orders, resulting in the passage of 26 laws in 17 states (47). If such statistics are depressing, even more alarming is the point made by Ellen Schrecker—author of *No Ivory Tower*, the classic study of McCarthyism's impact on campus—that this recent wave of educational repression is "worse than McCarthyism, which only targeted individual dissenters," while "today's culture wars invade the curriculum and the classroom" (1).

These attempts at repression cannot be viewed in isolation from the larger political climate, most notably the desire of the Trumpist movement to turn the clock back on race and gender equity. As Johnson, Ruth, and Schrecker put it, the educational gag orders have been "fueled by a desire to stall or reverse the gains made by progressive social movements since the 1960s" (2). The case studies in *The Right to Learn* attest that whether it is a white supremacist or homophobic impulse that yields the gag orders, the motivation is the same, fomenting what Johnson in her insightful chapter terms "an epistemology of ignorance," leaving students untaught and thus clueless about the history and persistence of bigotry and inequality (59). Issac Kamola's chapter documents the ways that a powerful network of right-wing billionaires, think tanks, and pundits have served this mission in their crude assaults on Critical Race Theory and the 1619 Project on slavery. The lesson seems to be that no matter how cynical or intellectually shabby the attacks, they can be impactful if propped up by big bucks and the right-wing media echo chamber. Even the Constitution, when properly distorted, can be enlisted in this assault, as Dennis Parker's brilliant chapter on the 14th amendment attests. This Radical Reconstruction amendment, designed to protect the rights

of formerly enslaved African Americans, is reinvented by the right as a tool for a mythological “color blind” constitution and history of the US, and accordingly is used to claim that Critical Race Theory, in viewing that history more realistically through a lens highlighting systemic racism, is somehow unconstitutional and un-American.

Among the most valuable chapters in *The Right to Learn* is Ellen Schrecker’s, which historicizes the Trumpist assault on academic freedom by tracing its roots to the right-wing backlash against the student movement of the 1960s. She sees that backlash as first eroding and then nearly dissolving the prestige and influence of the university in the US, which the right came to loathe as an institution hijacked by the Left. So unlike what she sees as the university’s Golden Age in the Cold War 1950s, the now Left-leaning university and its racially and gender-inclusive curriculum evoked not respect and generous funding, but defunding and disdain from the right as a kind of cultural fifth column, whose iconoclastic teachings, especially on racial and gender equity, were targeted for censorship and erasure.

This ‘60s backlash argument is helpful in a number of respects, especially with regard to the fiscal crises in higher education, which yielded increasing reliance on contingent-part time and non-tenure line-faculty who so often lack the academic freedom to stand up to would-be censors. This does, as Schrecker notes, make it difficult for faculty to unite to defend academic freedom.

But the idea that higher educational institutions have lost influence since the 1960s—in that supposedly Golden Age back then—seems dubious. There are in fact more than twice as many college students today as there were in the early 1960s. With many polls showing college students leaning left in our own century (most notably when democratic socialist Bernie Sanders was winning presidential college straw polls in 2016), it seems evident that right wingers, from the Wall Street Journal editorial page to Fox News, are upset because colleges and universities have too much influence, and fear that Left-liberal influence has spread to the K-12 curriculum. Of course, such fears are overdrawn, as evidenced by the fact that the #1 major on college campuses since the 1960s has been business. What it really comes down to is that no matter how many elections right-wing Republicans win, they cannot purge university liberalism, cannot control the democratic political ideas and cultural innovations generated by universities, and this—much like the disdain of the Right for Hollywood—ends in right-wing frustration, derision, and attempts at censorship and repression.

Even if we accept the 1960s backlash thesis concerning higher education, this still cannot fully account for the recent tidal wave of educational gag orders, since most of them target K-12 schools, not higher education. According to PEN America, it is only 39% of those orders that target colleges and universities (52). Since there was no mass student rebellion in the K-12 world in the 1960s, a backlash argument does not really work for this pre-college world. Here it seems that a much older reactionary educational ideal is at work. One might characterize this as a right-wing version of reproduction theory. From

Samuel Bowles and Hebert Gintis’s classic work, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) through today, leftist critics have bemoaned the way school systems reproduce social inequality and uphold the status quo in the American social order. On the right, on the other hand, such social reproduction in K-12 education is viewed as a plus, as the schools are viewed as an institution designed to serve and preserve the status quo, upholding traditional values. Since this conservative social function is undermined by curricula that challenges racism, homophobia, and sexism, it is little wonder that at school boards, legislative halls, and governors’ offices across red-state America such curricular innovations have become a popular punching bag.

If there is any weakness in *The Right to Learn* it is that none of the chapters focus on school teachers or on their actual classroom experience in the world of K-12 education amidst this era of censorship and book bans. One wants to hear from working teachers, especially those on the front lines of the culture wars, who in red-state America struggle to teach critical thinking in a school world in which it is being outlawed. My own connections with high school teachers in that world suggest a wide spectrum of responses, from fear and compliance to anger and defiance. The history of these teachers, and their colleagues at the middle and primary school level, has yet to be written, and one wishes that some of that history was captured in *The Right to Learn*.

The alarmist tone of *The Right to Learn* seems more than justified by the rich and memorable case studies, autobiographical narratives, oral and legislative histories offered by its contributors, as they track the right wing’s war on academic freedom. I would be the last person to bemoan this sounding of a fire bell in the night to warn us about right-wing authoritarianism, especially in the wake of January 6. Yet, at the risk of seeming pollyannaish, I suspect that despite all the sound and fury of this 400-pound Trumpist gorilla, its assaults on academic freedom are a sign of weakness, not strength. Generations of progressive scholars, inspired by the social movements of and since the 1960s, have produced powerful empirical and theoretical work that has challenged bigotry, taking us beyond the white parochialism, Eurocentrism, and heteronormativity that once dominated the curriculum. All this has been reinforced for decades through the work of a supremely talented and diverse multitude of novelists, journalists, visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, poets, and playwrights. While, of course, it is sad that red-state America’s political elite wants to shutter their classrooms to this culturally cosmopolitan world—and it is important for us, as *The Right to Learn* insists, to oppose such repression—even there students will encounter this cosmopolitanism and diversity when they go to a movie, watch TV, read a novel, or open a newspaper or their computers. Thus it seems not merely atavistic but pathetic for politicians on the right to imagine that they can reverse a cultural revolution this far advanced via repressive, anti-intellectual state laws that dumb down their schools. The Trumpist attempt to turn the clock back seems fated to fail, and one hopes that books like *The Right to Learn*, by

inspiring resistance to such revanchism, will make a major contribution to that failure.

Robert Cohen is a professor of social studies and history at NYU. He is currently the senior fellow at the University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement. His most recent books are *Confronting Jim Crow: Race, Memory, and the University of Georgia in the Twentieth Century* (2024) and *Rethinking America's Past: Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States in the Classroom and Beyond*, (2021), co-authored by Sonia E. Murrow.



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